An introductory essay on recurrent themes in Empson's early poems

I My aim of analyzing Empson's early poems

Some of Empson's early poems—especially ones with astronomic metaphors and others with moral awareness—have impressed me, though some critics and scholars have negative opinions of them.(1) It is true that in the poems by which I am moved it is not clear or easy to follow their arguments and meanings closely, but I will try to elucidate and analyze them to my best ability because I consent to the assumption that "poetry which impresses also repays investigation"(2) and admit the importance of Empson's own statement that "what is important for literary satisfaction is not, 'this is beautiful because of such and such a theory,' but 'this is all right; I am feeling correctly about this; I know the kind of way in which it is meant to be affecting me.' "(3)

II The characteristics of Empson's early poems and the Cambridge of midtwenties

Those of his early poems which attract (and also perplex) me most are the following: "The World's End", "Invitation to Juno", "Plenum and Vacuum", "Dissatisfaction with Metaphysics", "To an Old Lady", "Camping Out", "Arachne", "Legal Fiction", "Earth has shrunk in the Wash", "This Last Pain", "Homage to the British Museum", "Note on Local Flora" and "Doctrinal Point". These poems are included in *Poems,* published by Chatto and Windus in 1935. The first nine of these fourteen poems were already written in Empson's undergraduate years at Cambridge University. This same Cambridge where he was an undergraduate student in the later twenties was the center where literary and scientific innovatory activities were going on together. It is well known that he studied mathematics for two years there until he switched over to English studies in his third year, under the tutelage of I. A. Richards. Empson as a poet and critic was then deeply affected by Cambridge's interdisciplinary atmosphere and was earnestly engaged in drawing from many kinds of knowledge from various fields of study for figures of speech in his early poems. His great interest in scientific figures of speech, especially chemical ones, derives from the interdisciplinary atmosphere at Cambridge in those days. Chemical figures of speech are often seen not only in his early poems but also in his first descriptive critical work on English poetry: *Seven Types of Ambiguity.*(4)

In their introduction of detailed commentary on the poems of W. Empson, Philip and Averil Gardner give us a general account of the interdisciplinary Cambridge where the poet was producing elaborate and difficult poems deeply influenced not only by the books on modern scientific achievements but also by the books on the rediscovery of a certain English literary tradition:

> Clearly enough, Empson's early poetry and reputation owed much to their time and place: the Cambridge of the midtwenties, excited by the expanding horizons of science, by literary innovation, and by the redicovery of the Metaphysical poets, whose work seemed to fuse intellect and emotion. The atmosphere of post-Einsteinian physics and astronomy, with its combined pride in human achievement and possibility and humility before the size of the

universe and the extent of the unknown, is marvellously captured in Sir James Jeans's *The Universe Around Us* (1929) and Sir Arthur Eddington's *The Nature of the Physical World* (1928). Both books invaluably bring to life for the present-day reader of Empson's poems the world in which his imagination moved freely ; as does also a wide-ranging collection of essays on scientific discoveries in fields from astronomy to emtomology, entitled *Possible Worlds* (1927), by the Reader in Biochemistry at Cambridge, J. B. S. Haldane.(5)

Judging from the interdisciplinary Cambridge of the midtwenties and its influence on his early poems, Empson's early poetry may be defined as "neo-metaphysical poetry",(6) the method of which is "the hyper-metaphysical one of bringing things into the poems and using only a glancing minimum of their meaning to build the argument"(7) or that of "disconnected observation of a totally different nature held together by the thin thread of Empson's conceit"(8) or "that earlier 'metaphysical' mode, that zest for the game of connecting as many points as possible with as many others".(9) To put it in another way, the texture of his early poems are constructed out of a series of imageries from Greek myth, classical literary allusions and technical terms of various scientific fields of study on which the general meaning or argument of the poems can be made to turn.

III Empson's view of verse-writing

Next I will proceed to Empson's view of verse-writing before describing themes in the poems mentioned above, because I think the former is closely related with the latter. His view of writing poetry is shown in his short review of Houseman's poems in his critical essay on poetry :

> The first or only certain reason for writing verse is to clear your own mind and fix your own feelings, and for this purpose it would be stupid to borrow from people, and for this purpose you want to be as concentrated as possible.(10).

Empson gives us similar comments on the reasons for writing poetry in his other essays as well :

> I belive that rather little good poetry has been written in recent years, and that because it is no longer a profession in which ability can feel safe, the effort of writing a good bit of verse has in almost every case been carried through almost as a clinical thing ; it was done only to save the man's own sanity.(11)
>
> The poet should write about the things that really worry him, in fact worry him to the point of madness.(12)
>
> My few good ones are all on the basis of expressing on unresolved conflict.(13)

What is common to these four passages is the idea that Empson writes poetry for reasons of recovering his sanity or keeping his balance of mind. This "conflict-resolving" theory on poetry was suggested by his tutor in Cambridge, I. A. Richards, who "judged poetry by its success in harmonizing a variety of conflicting impulses."(14)

Then, what is the "unresolved conflict" for the poet? There must be many possibilities conceivable for it, but one of the most imortant possibilities seems to be an idealistic one, — "the predicament of man as species and as individual, in a universe and world in which he must

habit but which he neither controls nor can fully understand".[15] We can see it in the following statement by Empson himself.

> The first book,[16] you see, is about the young man feeling frightened, frightened of women, frightened of jobs, frightened of everything, not knowing what he could possibly do.[17]

This notional conflict or despair or fear of young Empson's is pervasively seen in his early poems, and it derives from his highly acute sense of a predicament he sensed by reading up on the books on modern scientific discoveries, especially Relativity theory. In other words it results from his pessimistic recognition of the relativity of all the beliefs or values or theories in the modern world, any of which he can never trust absolutely.

This same predicament with which all modern men are faced is also described as the "present state of indecision of the cultured world" in *Seven Types of Ambiguity*.

> And certainly one is again faced with the problem about the hen and the egg ; the dogma pruduces the sensibility, but it must itself have been produced by it. But to say that the dogma does not influence the sensibility is absurd. People only say it when they are trying to put the sensibility in a peculiar state of control over the dogma... people feel uncertain as to what sort of validity a critical dogma can have, how far one ought to be trying to be independent of one's own age, how far one ought to be trying to be independent of one's own prefereces, and do not want their sensibility to be justified by reasons because they are afraid that once they start reasoning they will fall into the wrong point of view.[18]

IV **Recurrent themes in Empson's early poems**

This modern dilemma is clearly and symbolically expressed in the following two stanzas, which show us his precarious and contradictory state of being, through mainly modern scientific figures of speech.

> Alas, how hope for freedom. no bars bind ;
> Space is like earth, rounded, a paddled cell ;
> Plumb the stars' depth, your lead bumps you behind ;
> Blind Satan's voice rattled the whole of Hell.
>
> Apple of knowledge and forgetful mere
> From Tantalus too differential bend.
> The shadow clings. The world's end is here.
> This place's curvature precludes its end.
>
> (from The World's End)

The mention of Satan and Tantalus in these quatrains represents man's search for the ultimate end or truth. But this attempt by humans is made futile by the poet's recognition of the logical consequence of Relativity Theory or by the implied meaning from Greek myth imagery. Empson's own notes on these verses[19] help us to interprete them better, and Gardners' commentary on Relativity Theory[20] is also useful in understanding the implications of these two stazas more thoroughly. Taking these notes and commentary into account, we can say that the resultant meaning of the total effect of these verses is that "the human urge for

freedom of escape, always hard to fulfill, is rendered quite futile if your world view offers nowhere on the other side of the fence to turn to"[21] or that man is "an open prisoner in the curved universe his science has discovered".[22]

Similar representations of this human dilemma are repeatedly described in his other early poems as well through different kinds of imageries from various fields of study that Empson learned in the Cambridge. The followings are some illustrative examples of stanzas that show us modern man's dilemma. By reading through these stanzas in succession, we are made aware of how strong the poet's concern for this matter is and how much he is interested in expressing the same problem through metaphysical figures of speech.

Some beetles (the tupped females can worm out)
Massed in their halls of knowingly chewed splinter
Eat faster than the treasured fungi sprout
And stave off suffocation until winter.

(from the last stanza of "Value is in Activity")

Crossing and doubling, many-fingered, hounded,
Those desperate stars, those worms dying in flower
Ashed paper holds, nose-sailing, search their bounded
Darkness for a last acre to devour.

(from the last stanza of "Letter II")

Hatched in a rasping darkness of dry sand
The child cicada some brave root discovers:
Parturient with urine from this lover
Coheres from chaos, only to evade,
An ordered Nature his own waste has made,
And builds his mortared Babel from the incumbent shade.

(from the first stanza of "Letter IV")

By following these three stanzas in succession, we realize the poet's obsessive belief that the act of living in the modern world is an escapable burden under which we must keep searching for an imaginary truth or meaning to our lives in vain.

In the following two stanzas we are symbolically given the poet's ironic realization. It can be explained like this: even if we think we have succeeded in getting an answer to the worrying problem about our life and world—the unresolved human predicament—, we notice at once that the answer may be a double-edged sword, one that not only never relieves us from pain but also increases our pain from unseen sides of the problem, eventually leading us to death:

You are nomad yet; the lighthouse beam you own
Flashes, like Lucifer, through the firmament.
Earth's axis varies; your dark central cone
Wavers, a candle's shadow, at the end.

(from the last stanza of "Legal Fiction")

And cannot tell. He who all answers brings
May (ever in the great taskmaster's eye)
Dowser be of his candle as of springs,

And pump the valley with the tunnel dry.

(from the last stanza of "Earth has shrunk")

In the following stanza as well, we are shown the poet's cool and detached reflection on the human predicament. Gardner sees this predicament like this: "man is a conscious creature, struggling to comprehend what always escapes him".[23] But the implication of this stanza is a little different from those of the stanzas quoted above, because the poet's attention is paid to the self-containedness of the magnolia's flower. To put it more precisely, the poet's realization of the inefficacy of man's effort to seek the ultimate law or truth in the phenomenal world gradually leads him to become aware of the difference between man's state of existence and a plant's, and finally to stare in despair at the tree (magnolia) which exists self-sufficiently without care and anxiety.

The over-all that Solomon should wear
Gives these no cope who cannot know of care
They have no gap to spare that they should share
The rare calyx we stare at in despair.
They have no other that they should compare.
Their arch of promice the wide Heavyside layer
They rise above a vault into the air.

(from "Doctrinal Point")

The thought or idea common to all the stanzas quoted above is that the pursuit of the ultimate truth or freedom is useless or pointless for modern man because of the relativity of any system of values, and consequently man is viewed as a being wandering endlessly without reaching the eventual justice of life or the last end of the world. Such an implication is metaphorically represented by Lucifer in "Legal Fiction", Dowser in "Earth has shrunk", Satan and Tantalus in "The World End", beetles in "Value is in Activity", desperate stars in "Letter II" and child cicada in "Letter IV."

But because of the poet's acute realization of this human dilemma, he is led to conclude that dreams or fictions by which we can design and rebuild our own lives become necessary for maintaining a significant life in a "too non-Euclidean predicament," even if these fictions may be seen as useless from others' points of view. Therefore the necessity of fictions or dreams and a style or sense of balance (the latter is acquired by gaining the former) is clearly expressed in the following stanzas as the poet's literary and philosophical manifesto. The stanzas quoted below are the first, fifth, eighth, and ninth, in turn, from "This Last Pain" and the first two stanzas from "Arachne":

This last pain for the damned the Fathers found:
"They knew the bliss with which they were not crowned."
Such, but on earth, let me foretell,
Is all, of heaven or of hell.

All those large dreams by which men long live well
Are magic-laterned on the smoke of hell;
This then is real, I have implied,

A painted, small, transparet slide.

Feign then what's by a decent tact believed
And act that state is only so conceived,
And build an edifice of form

For house where phantoms may keep warm.
Imagine, then, by miracle, with me,
(Ambiguous gifts, as what gods give must be)
What could not possibly be there,
And learn a style from a despair.

(from "This Last Pain")

Twixt devil and deep sea, man hacks his caves;
Birth, death; one, many; what is true, and seems;
Earth's vast hot iron, cold space's empty waves:

King spider, walks the velvet roof of streams:
Must bird and fish, must god and beast avoid:
Dance, like nine angels, on pin-point extremes.

(from "Arachne")

As has been shown in all the above verses, Empson's vision of man's state of being in the modern world is represented as a picture of both glory and doom, whether his life is seen in terms of such a small world as beetles, worms, spiders and cicadas, or of such a large world as the earth, stars and cosmos. Man's lofty pride and attempt at searching for "freedom, rebellion, even—as with Tantalus—trespass on divine property"[24] is inescapably followed by its failure and consequent sense of the futility of such an attempt. In spite of his splended power of imagination and reason with which he can make efforts to get to the ultimate truth of life and the world, he is, in the end, left helplessly without anything solid and absolute to sustain his precarious life except for his fictions and dreams. These he can only produce to keep his life significant and comfortable for himself at least. As Empson's note on "Plenum and Vacuum" points out, man is "left with an inescapable system of things each nothing in itself".[25] As the poet thinks of man's state of being in this way, Empson concludes that he must have "the courage of his lack of convictions"[26] and avoid the opposite extremes ("the contradictory absolutes of philosophy, the one and the many, etc,"). Or, for the same reason, he must be "faced with the problem of retaining empty values and of pretending that they mean something." From this notional realization of his ontological human dilemma is created Empson's principal philosophy of art and life, —"the object of life, after all, is not to understand things, but to maintain one's defences and equilibrium and live as well as one can."[27]

Notes

(1). F. R. leavis, *New Bearing in English Poetry*. Penguin, 1976, p. 148.

I. A., Richards, 'The poetry of William Empson'. Review of *poems* (1935), *Cambridge Review*, 14 Eeb., 1936, p. 253.
W. H. Mellers, 'Cats in Air-Pumps'. *Scrutiny* IX, No. 3 (Dec. 1940), pp. 289-300.
William Troy, Review of *Collected Poems* (1949). *Poetry* (Chicago), July 1949, p. 235.
Hugh Kenner, 'The Son of Spiders'. Review of *Collected Poems* (1949). *Poetry* (Chicago), LXXVI (June 1950), p. 154.
Brownjhon, Alan, Review of *Collected Poems*. *Departure* (Oxford), Vol. 3, No. 9 (Spring 1956), pp. 20-21.
Thom Gunn, Review of *Collected Poems*. *The London Magazine* III, No. 2 (Feb. 1956), pp. 71-73.
John Danby, 'William Empson'. *Critical Quarterly*, Vol. No. 2 (Summer 1959), p. 102.
A. E. Rodway, Review of *Collected Poems*. *Essays in Criticism* VI, No. 2 (1956) pp. 233-236.
Colin Falck, 'William Empson'. *The Modern Poet : Essays from The Review*, ed. Ian Hamilton. MacDonald, 1968, pp. 56-57.
A. T. Tolley, *THE POETRY OF THE THIRTIES*. (London Victor Gollancz Ltd, 1975) pp. 77-78.

Roughly summing up these writers' views of Empson's early poems, they agree that those poems are often too intellectually compressed and elaborated to be appreciated as poetry at all, though they all acknowledge that in some poems in which the unity of Empson's intellectual agility and his personal feeling is accomplished well Empson is second to no other twenty century poets. Compared with these disparaging views, the following critics (or poets or scholars) are in line with each other in a more friendly and praising evaluation of his early poems. Michael Roberts, 'A Metaphysical Poet'. *The London Mercury* XXXII, No. 190 (Aug. 1935), pp. 387-89.
Richard Eberhart, 'Empson's Poetry'. *Accent* IV (Summer 1944). pp. 195-207.
John wain, 'Ambiguous Gifts'. *Penguin New Writing*, No. 40 (1950), pp. 118-28.
——, 'The Poetic Mind of William Empson'. *Lugano Review* (Autumn, 1976), pp. 95-118.
Hilary Corke, Review of Collected Poems, *The Listner* (6 Oct. 1955), p. 565.
Anthony Thwaite, *Essays on Contemporay British Poetry*. Tokyo, Kenkyusha, 1957, pp. 147-51.
John Howard Willis, Jr., *William Empson*. (Columbia Essays on Modern Writers, No. 39), Columbia University Press, 1969.
Christopfer Ricks, 'Empson's Poetry'. *William Empson : The Man and His Work*, ed. Roma Gill. Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1974, pp. 145-207.
John Fuller, 'An Edifice of Meaning'. *Encounter* (Nov. 1974), pp. 75-79.

(2). Philip and Averil Gardner, *The God Approached : A Commentary on the Poems of William Empson*. (Chatto and Windus, 1978), p. 32.
(3). William Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity*. (Chatto and Windus, 1970), p. 254.
(4). Ibid., p. x., p. 240., p. 247. etc. The word 'reaction' often seen in these pages is used to describe Empson's experience of poetry.
(5). Philip and Averil Gardner, op. cit., pp. 21-22.
(6). John Wain, 'Ambiguous Gifts', p. 125. According to Wain's explanation of the characteristics of metaphysical poetry, two features are pointed out : "a kind of general modernity which leads poets to bring in current ideas and current language, and a strong, at times almost perverse, desire to follow the argument wherever it leads the poem."
(7). Colin Falck, op. cit., p. 57.
(8). Strickland Geoffrey,
(9). Hugh Kenner, op. cit., p. 153.
(10). W. Empson, 'London Letter', *Poetry* (Chicago), Vol. 49 (Jan. 1937), p. 222.
(11). W. Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (1970), p. ix.
(12). This statement of Empson's is quoted from "Richard Ellman and Robert Oclair ed., *Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry*. (W. W. Norton and Campany, New York, 1973), p. 724."
(13). W. Empson, 'Willaim Empson in Conversation with Christopher Ricks', *The Modern Poet*, ed. by Ian Hamilton, MacDonald, 1968, pp. 185-6.
(14). I A. Richards, *Principles of Literary Criticism*. (Kegan Paul, 1934), chapters4-7.
(15). Philip and Averil Gardner, op. cit., p. 34.

(16). *Poems* (1935) by Empson is referred here.
(17). This statement of Empson's is quoted from introductory notes to Empson's poetry of "Alan Bold, ed., *Cambridge Book of Englsh Verse 1939-1975* (Cambridge University Press, 1976), p. 188."
(18). W. Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (1970), p. 255.
(19). Empson's notes on these verses in *Collected Poems* reads:

Blind Satan: blind like his author Milton. He called so loud that all the hollow deep of Hell resounded.

Differential: they follow his movements exactly, as calculated like the differential coefficients used in formimg this view of the world.
Precludes: "stops from happening" and "already shuts." End in space but blurred onto end in time conceived as eventual justice-"what there is of it occurs here."

(20). Philip and Averil Gardner, op. cit., p. 47.
Einstein formulated his Special Theory of Relativity in 1905 and his General Theory in 1915. During Empson's time at Cambridge Einstein's great follower and clarifier, Arthur Eddington, was Plumian Professor of Astromony, and it is his description of space as 'finite but unbounded' that lies behind this and many other early Empson poems. The implications of Einstein were also stated, thus, by J. B. S. Haldane in *Possible Worlds* (1927), which Empson reviewed in *Granta* (27 January 1928): '—— the extended theory of relativity seems to lead inevitably to the view that the universe is finite, and that progress in direction would ultimately lead one back to the startingpoint.' (p. 4.)
(21). Ibid., p. 47.
(22). Ibid., p. 49.
(23). Ibid., P. 146.
(24). Ibid., pp. 47-48.
(25). W. Empson, *Collected Poems* (Chatto and Windus, 1969), p. 49.
(26). A. E. Rodway, op. cit., p. 238.
(27). J. H. Willis, Jr., op. cit., p. 35.